

The truth about the dungeon master who disappeared in the steam tunnels

JASON LOUV / 4:08 AM TUE NOV 11, 2014

Jason Louv on the short life of James Dallas Egbert III, and the long shadow his death casts on those used him as a prop in the age of Satanic Panic

When I was about fourteen, I discovered a copy of *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* in the local library's used-book bin. Noting that it had something to do with *Dungeons and Dragons*, and also noting that it cost about \$1, I bought it.

That book stuck with me for a long time.

Egbert was [the sixteen-year-old who infamously disappeared](#) in the Michigan State University steam tunnels in 1979, supposedly during a live-action *Dungeons and Dragons* session, provoking a nation-wide scare about the then-new role-playing game. When Egbert vanished, his parents hired William Dear, a private detective, to locate him. Dear theorized that it was Egbert's involvement in *D&D* that led to his disappearance; he went on to investigate the game himself, even going [so far as to play a session](#).

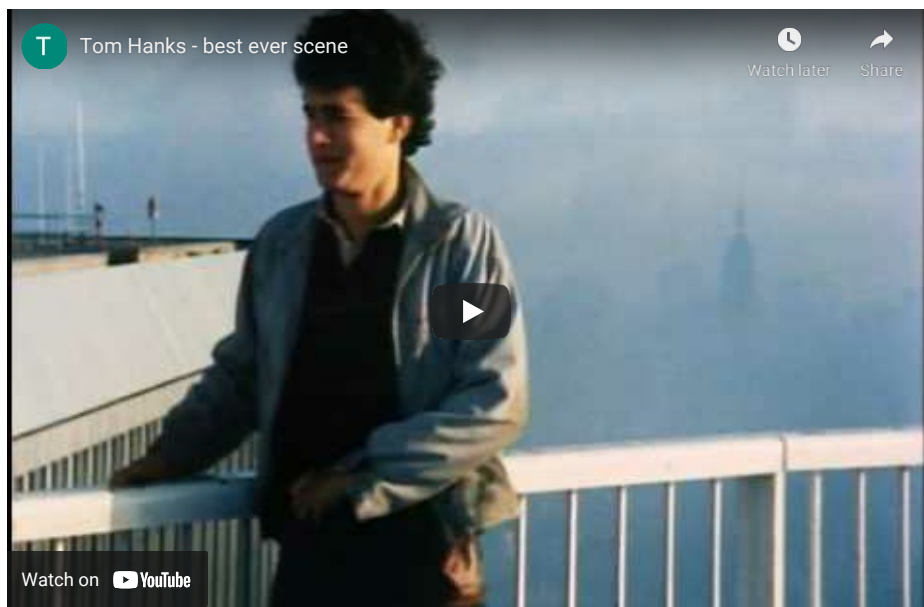


It was the early days of the Satanic Panic—the Christian Right's effort to convince the public

that *D&D*, heavy metal, backwards-masked messages in records, the occult, Halloween, and alleged (but never substantiated) ritual abuse in day cares were nodes in a gigantic conspiratorial web ensnaring the youth of America in the clutches of the Dark One—and Egbert's disappearance would only serve to enflame the public's fears. The case would inspire the infamous TV movie *Mazes and Monsters*, in which a young Tom Hanks freaks out from playing too much D&D and stabs one of his friends in a steam tunnel after hallucinating that he's turned into a monster. (The adults, of course, just don't understand.)



Now, as all nerds know, the most perfidious thing about *Dungeons and Dragons* is not that it drives you crazy and makes you see monsters, it's that it keeps you from getting laid. However, it also tends to entrain skills that kids will use later in life to become successful adults—while awkward teenagers think that they're role-playing wizards and dark elves, what they're actually doing is simulating something like a corporate meeting, complete with paper-shuffling, public speaking, teamwork, obsessing over numerical minutiae, delegating responsibilities (like who's getting the Mountain Dew next), and so on. (Name me one other activity that can get hormone-crazed teenage monkeys to sit around a table, scribble on paper and talk to each other for hours on end.) Little did parents understand that *Dungeons and Dragons* would both successfully drive a wall between their kids and anything cool, like sex and drugs, it would also train them to be productive suits in later life. Birth control and corporate training in one game!



Of course, at the time, the public saw *Dungeons and Dragons* as akin to goat sacrifice. And Egbert was the focus of that hysteria during the weeks in which Dear searched for him.

The truth of the matter, however, was much more painful. At the time of his disappearance, Egbert was a sixteen-year-old prodigy who had been pushed by his parents since early childhood to overachieve. They'd rushed him to graduate from school early, and subsequently enrolled him in Michigan State, where he stuck out like a preschooler. In addition to his social misplacement and the tremendous academic pressure put on him by his parents, Egbert was struggling to hide his blossoming homosexuality—both from his parents and from a not-exactly-friendly 1979 Michigan. Unable to make friends at the university, Egbert drifted into the *Dungeons and Dragons* players—but only briefly, looking for some way, any way to connect. He also drifted into drugs. And what actually happened when he disappeared was not a D&D freak out—Egbert entered the steam tunnels to take an overdose of Quaaludes. When that didn't work, he ran for the home of an older male "admirer," where he hid out for weeks, leading to the hysteria over his disappearance. His parents, unwilling to publicly air the fact that their son was gay, readily bought the *Dungeons and Dragons* narrative.

Egbert was eventually located by Dear, who spent a good deal of time trying to help him come to terms with his situation and listen to him, something nobody had done. Unfortunately, Egbert ran again, this time to the gay party scene in New Orleans, where he again tried to kill himself—with cyanide, again unsuccessfully. After taking a job as a laborer at an oil field, he attempted suicide yet again, this time with a gun. He succeeded.

Brilliant Computer Student Dies From Gun Wound

By WILLIAM ROBBINS
Special to The New York Times

DAYTON, Ohio, Aug. 17 — James Dallas Egbert 3d, the brilliant computer student whose monthlong disappearance last year still baffles official investigators, died yesterday as a result of a bullet wound that the police said they believed was self-inflicted.

The 17-year-old youth had hovered near death since Monday at Grandview Hospital, kept alive by life-support systems.

Dr. James Davis, the coroner, said today that the life-support systems had been removed after "several electroencephalograms indicated legal brain death." In Ohio, he explained, three such findings are required before the systems can be removed. The hospital would not comment.

Early last week, after doctors announced that he had suffered irreversible brain damage and had no chance of recovering, his parents gave the hospital permission to make various organs available for transplants.

The hospital used a computer network to find recipients. Last night the hospital spokesman said that organs would go to patients in several states, including New Jersey.

The youth's death came in mid-afternoon, but the hospital did not confirm it until 10:30 P.M. Max Peterson, a spokesman for the hospital, said that the confir-



United Press International
James Dallas Egbert 3d

game called Dungeons and Dragons. Some investigators speculated that the note and pins placed in a geometrical pattern on a board in his room had somehow been associated with the game, and there was speculation that he was playing a version of the game in a network of steam tunnels under the campus.

Intellectual Fantasy Game

In the highly complex fantasy game, players assume the roles of contrived medieval characters who oppose each other in war campaigns. It was said that Dallas, who graduated from high school at the age of 14 and who had an I.Q. above 140, was attracted to the game by its intellectual challenge.

He was found last Sept. 12 in another state by a private investigator, William Dear of Dallas, who was engaged by his parents. The circumstances of the disappearance have never been explained, and Mr. Dear and the parents have refused to give details. Since last Monday the parents, Anna and James Dallas Egbert 2d, have declined to make comments of any kind.

Dallas Egbert transferred last year from Michigan State to Wright State University here, where he continued to study computer systems until he dropped out last April. Since then, he had been working in an optical store run by his father.

A private funeral service is to be held for the youth.

William Dear wrote *The Dungeon Master* four years later (Egbert, deeply pained by his homosexuality, had urged Dear not to reveal the truth), largely to correct the misrepresentation of the case by the news media.

Needless to say, Dear's account totally harshed my 14-year-old mellow when all I wanted was a book that would properly explain to me what THAC0 was.[†]

Now, in hindsight, it strikes me what a poster child Egbert is for the true teenage outsider—not the dumb rock burnout, but the one that can truly say that "nobody understands me," the one that's judged to be too smart, too weird, too queer, too in the wrong place at the wrong time. Reading stuff on Egbert on the Web now, I notice a recurring theme—people seem to agree that, had he just chosen to hang on a few years longer, everything would have been fine. What Egbert decided to annihilate himself for in 1980 is now much closer to mainstream, legally protected life in suburban America.

As dark as Egbert's tale is, and as damning of its time and place as it is, it's also a startling testament to how much things have changed—and yet not at all. Columbine and Virginia Tech kind of make steam tunnel escapades look positively Archie and Jughead, and we still live in a world in which homophobic violence is endemic. But as flat and boring as our monoculture is, it gives me hope that it's still an increasingly accepting one.

Even of *Dungeons and Dragons*... well, kind of.

[†] If you get this joke, you are going to hell.

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